

## Know Thyself-- But Don't Forget to Learn About the Customer Too by Jenny Baer-Riedhart

### Crash and Learn

I made several appearances at NASA Headquarters (HQ) to brief higher-ups on the status of my program when I was the program manager of a Joint Sponsored Research Alliance (JSRA). Early on in this endeavor, I learned a key lesson in working with multiple customers. Always know the folks you're meeting with, and always tailor what you're going to say based on who you know will be there.

I learned this the hard way, I'm afraid to say, after getting thrown out of people's offices. What can I say, I'm a slow learner. I wasn't quite as attuned to the personalities in the room as I should have been, what their requirements were, what their problems might be with what I was saying; I failed to realize that I was basically perceived as a threat, a bringer of very bad tidings.

"Hey we've got this great program back in California," I said, and from the word go they were hammering me. They didn't want to hear anything about a program aimed at developing Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology.

"This is not going to work! This is not the kind of airplane we want! Why are you telling us about this!"

From their standpoint, I was the enemy, someone who would suck up resources they needed in other areas.

I should have seen it ahead of time. The thing is I did see it, but I thought all I had to do was show up and explain how successful the program was and voila, they were in my pocket. Yes, I knew how they were fighting for their other platforms, how they had their own constraints and clients whom they had to please, but I believed in my heart that this program was important for NASA and that I could convince them of it.

What I failed to recognize was that people are not convinced just because the seller believes she has a wonderful product. *The seller needs to understand what the buyer wants from a product.*

### Staying Alive

You cultivate supporters at HQ by putting yourself in other people's shoes and learning what do they want to get out of this. In my case, I imagined that I was on the other side of the table and I've got a tight budget and I'm looking at having to cut programs. "Tell me why should we keep you alive?" they're going to ask. I think, 'What would I want to hear if I was in that position?' I would want to make sure I



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



#### Jenny Baer-Riedhart is

the Deputy for the Public Affairs, Commercialization and Education (PACE) Office at the NASA Dryden Flight Research Center. Before that she was the Program Manager for the ERAST Program in charge of technology flight testing for Unpiloted Aerial Vehicles. She has worked her entire career at Dryden, starting out in propulsion engineering on the first computer-controlled jet engine for the F-111 project.



I failed to realize that I was basically perceived as a threat, a bringer of very bad tidings.



(CONTINUED)

## Know Thyself-- But Don't Forget to Learn About the Customer Too

had a viable program, a program that I could get recognition for, one I could get congressional backing for; it should be successful, and it might as well be unique too. Even better, it should NOT have to cost a lot of money.

And that, basically, was how I packaged it.



Pathfinder in flight over lakebed.

But before I went anywhere near HQ again, I did some serious training. I got in shape. You might even say I went to boot camp.

Mainly I found people who appeared regularly at HQ to talk about their programs and used them as a sounding board. We set up role-playing sessions, or what we endearingly referred to as our "murder boards." Folks from my Center and other partners in the JSRA pretended to be my audience back at HQ. We didn't just pick people arbitrarily, we looked for ones with areas of expertise similar to those we knew I would interface with at HQ. I briefed them with the charts I was going to take, they told me what I'd be killed on, and I changed what I had to in order to stay alive. When I went back to HQ, it still didn't feel like I was among friends, but at least nobody kicked me out of his office.

"Here's my understanding of where you guys need to be, the missions you need

**||** You cultivate supporters at HQ by putting yourself in other people's shoes and learning what do they want to get out of this.

**||**

## Know Thyself-- But Don't Forget to Learn About the Customer Too

(CONTINUED)

to be looking at, the platforms you want to support."

Basically, I just figured out what mattered most to them. The information I gathered straight out of their reports. I said to them this is what you guys want, and this is how I can deliver.

"This airplane is going to provide you with sensors that are better than any of the ones you've currently got. These sensors you'll be able to use on the platforms you're already flying and at a much lower cost."

I brought charts that were worth more to my program than an original Picasso. Talk about visual aids, I had one with 40 pictures showing all the things we were doing and how they were interrelated. It was eye watering. They were blown away.

The rest of course, is history. Years after the events described here, the program's legacy demonstrates our work to sell UAVs at HQ was well worth the effort. Helios soared this summer to world altitude records, and reached the thinnest edges of Earth's atmosphere. There is even talk now that someday a craft based on this design is going to be used to study the atmosphere on Mars. By then, I expect, no one will ever recall our early battles to prove we had a winning project from the start.

### Lessons

- There are times when the role of the project leader is simply to sell the project.
- Projects can, and do, succeed because of politics. And they fail because of politics as well. Politics does not have to be a dirty word. If it means working closely and openly with customers and stakeholders, it is an essential approach that requires continuous dedication of time and attention.
- The most compelling sales pitch you can make is not that you have something wonderful to sell. It is 'I understand what you need.'



### Question

How do you work to discover what your customer wants and needs?